

## WINNEBAGO ORAL AND WRITTEN NARRATIVES

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### Background:

In comparing spoken Chuj, a Mayan language, with written texts produced by native speakers during a recent literacy development program in Guatemala, Judith Maxwell 1981, discovered the syntactic structure of the written materials to be simpler and less diversified than that of the oral. This finding is not in accord with those of most comparative studies of oral and written discourse which characterize written language as more syntactically complex and less fragmented than speech. Maxwell hypothesizes that the deficiencies of her written Chuj examples stem from the brevity of their authors' experience in writing their native language and their attempts to make it conform to Spanish, their only previous model of writing.

Intrigued with Maxwell's positive oral as well as negative written findings, I requested Felix White, Sr., of the Nebraska Winnebago community to narrate a Winnebago myth<sup>1</sup> and to write a version of it using the Winnebago syllabary. Although Winnebago, a Siouan language, is, like Chuj, a predominately oral tradition, the Winnebagoes have been in possession of their syllabary for nearly a century, and Mr. White is adept at letter writing, its primary use.<sup>2</sup> Thus White's texts come from a language tradition which is overwhelmingly oral, but which possesses a more mature written version than that examined by Maxwell. White's written style resembles his spoken, but his written narrative follows the oral word for word in only a few instances, being on the whole a different and longer retelling consisting of 120 sentences compared to 67 in the oral tale.

### Theory:

In a recent article in Language, Deborah Tannen (1982:3) points out that speech is generally held to be context bound compared to the relative decontextualization of writing, and that:

cohesion is established in spoken discourse through para-linguistic and non-linguistic channels (tone of voice, intonation, prosody, facial expression and gesture), while cohesion is established in writing through lexicalization and complex syntactic structures which make connectives explicit and which show relationships between propositions through subordination and other foregrounding and back-grounding devices...

Along the same lines, Wallace Chafe (1982:38-48) characterizes written language as possessing a high degree of syntactic integration compared to the fragmentation of spoken language, while speech typically has a high level of involvement between speaker and audience compared to the detachment of written discourse. Syntactic features Chafe lists as contributing to the greater integration of writing include significantly increased use of nominalizations, participles, attributive adjectives, conjoined phrases and series of phrases, sequences of prepositional phrases, complement clauses, relative clauses and subordinating conjunctions. He considers passivation and nominalization to be written detachment strategies, while the involvement of speech is manifested in first person references, references to the speaker's mental processes, monitoring of information flow through the use of such constructions as you know, I mean and well, emphatic participles such as just and really, fuzziness as in the phrase sort of, and direct quotations.

Both Chafe and Tannen warn against conceiving the differences they describe between writing and speech as absolutes rather than typical strategies or extremes on a continuum. They emphasize the importance of distinguishing between different genres and registers of discourse within and across modes. While Tannen thinks that written language per se is characterized by greater integration than oral language, she holds that certain types of written language also employs typically oral strategies in order to increase reader involvement. She considers short stories, novels, poetry and other literary writing to bear similarities to spoken forms in the involvement generated by their use of repetition of sounds and words, syntactic parallelism, rhythm, direct quotation, detail, and even hesitations, repetition of ideas, and fillers.

Some limited data I have collected in English essentially bears out Tannen's analysis. I asked a colleague to write a story about an incident which he had previously narrated on tape. His written account is syntactically complex, employing multiple embedding and much other subordination as well as focus shifting through unusual word order. As Tannen would predict, the written story makes heavy use of the "oral" devices of syntactic parallelism, repetition, rhythm, quotations, concrete detail and even one instance of a deliberate repair:

- 1) I had seen a treeman swing, no float, from one precarious perch to another... (McEwen 1982)

My colleague's oral story, an effective spoken tale which utilizes all of the involvement strategies heretofore mentioned with the addition of puns and solicitation of remarks from the audience, consists in large part of simple SVO clauses strung together with the conjunction and. It is highly fragmented, uses constant repair mechanisms, switches back and forth between present and past tense, and features the use of the deictic modifier this instead of the indefinite article. In so doing, it corresponds to the findings of Elinor Ochs 1979 concerning differences between planned (written) and unplanned (oral) discourse as well as to Tannen and Chafe.

## The Winnebago Texts:

The two Winnebago narratives bear out the theories about speech and writing in some ways and depart from them in others. All of the oral involvement strategies mentioned by Tannen and Chafe, and several more besides, appear in the texts. This is true of both the written and the spoken tale except in the case of exclusively oral paralinguistic features, deictic demonstrative pronouns, first and second person references to speaker and audience, and personalized remarks to the audience.

The greatest difference from the finding of Tannen and Ochs is that integration and syntactic complexity characterize the Winnebago oral narrative as well as its written counterpart. Fragmentation in the spoken tale is minimal, limited to hesitations, fillers, and some false starts, the worst of which occurs in the first sentence. Both accounts contain only enough "simple sentences" to create stylistic emphasis.

Dell Hymes 1981, Dennis Tedlock 1978, William Bright 1982, Chafe 1981 and 1982, and others have noted that oral literature constitutes an apparent exception to the simplicity and fragmentation characteristic of most spoken language, possessing instead various types of cohesive structures which they identify as those of poetry rather than prose. Therefore, I have attempted to approximate some of the poetic qualities of the examples which follow by arranging them in verse form with both literal and free English translations.<sup>3</sup> The written sentences appear to me to be patterned closely enough upon the oral style to also warrant the presentation I make of them in verse, but they do lack some of the structuring devices characteristic of the oral tale, and I find their identification as poetry more problematical.

## Involvement Strategies:

## 2) a.

éesgeniŋsge (waakšík) waakšígra woorágiregá,

éegu (woorág) waikánuka horágrušjānīnega,

héeegu téežeesge horágirešyunge,  
wahánakšānq.

## b.

that like sort of  
(people) -people the -storytell they when,

continuing on  
(stories) -myths sitting those -telling they finished when,

continuing on  
this that like -to tell they used to because,  
I am speaking sitting declarative.

c.

When

they finished telling a myth  
people told  
what they meant by it,

Because

they used to explain them like that,  
I am doing it too.

In example 2 from the oral text, the alliteration and assonance found frequently in both tales is apparent in the beginning word phrase ésgenijsge, sort of like that, and throughout the sentence. The suffix nijisge, sort of, is also an example of the involvement strategy Chafe labels "fuzziness." The rhyme produced by repetition of the suffix ga, when, at the end of two clauses combines with their parallel syntactic structure to strengthen the cohesion of the sentence, as does repetition of the verb forms based on horák and woorák, to tell and to storytell, and repetition of the information flow monitoring constructions éegų, héegų, (and zéegų elsewhere in the text) which mean continuing on with the story. Thus, use of éegų, héegų and zéegų, found primarily in the oral text, helps bind and structure sentences rather than fragment them as it would at first appear to do.

The incidence of false starts (at the beginning of clauses) represented by the two words in parentheses, is unusually high in this sentence; most sentences have none. Tannen includes repairs along these lines in her discussion of oral involvement strategies, and indeed, they can be seen to be a form of repetition, in appositive relationship to the words that follow them, and minimally disruptive of the cohesion of the sentence. Example 2 includes first person reference to the speaker and, like all Winnebago, is highly rhythmic because of its accent and vowel length patterns, both phonemic features of the language according to Susman 1943.

3) a.

maʔnégi  
waʔaxéte  
waʔaʃíʃik  
haʒebwígi,  
waʔakʃík  
huunúbimaniña  
wooćéxi  
hogiwánaki,  
žée  
žeesgánaʔa  
leewáhi jíi  
wa'ųžé.

b.  
 earth the here  
     things big  
         things bad  
             they came plural when,  
 people  
     legs two with to walk the  
         difficulties  
             they set in their path when,  
 those  
     those like those  
         to kill them - he came  
             he did quotative.

c.  
 When  
     big things  
         bad things  
             came to the earth  
 to set difficulties  
     in the path  
         of the people,  
             those who walk on two legs,  
 he came  
     to kill  
         those things,  
             he did.

Example 3, from the written text, displays many of the same oral involvement strategies found in the spoken tale, including alliterative and assonant repetition, in, for example, *wažaxéte*, *wažaxíšik*, and *waqkšik* (big things, bad things, and people), and the use of rhyming suffixes (i.e. *gi* and *ki* when) at the end of clauses. The use of another involvement enhancing technique, concrete imagery, as found in the phrases *huunúbiṁaṇiṣṣa* (the two-legged walkers) and *woočéxi hogiwáṇaki* (when they set difficulties in their path) is the result of direct borrowing from the oral tradition.

- 4) a.  
     te'é  
         Jaagú hirorák'ukJenegiži,  
     hagoréižá éeJaxJí  
         hirapérezikJéneena,  
     hoit'éra  
         hirapéresgiži.

b.

This one

what - with your own you do future if,

time one - perhaps

you know causitive future declarative,

language the

you know when.

c.

What

you will do with this one,

perhaps sometime

you will know,

When you know

the language.

In example 4 from the oral text there are two audience involvement features not found in the written tale. One is the deictic pronoun *te'é* this one (*Ze'é* that one is also used in the spoken story). The other exclusively oral strategy in example 4 is direct address of the audience using the second person pronoun for that purpose as distinguished from its use in conversations between characters. The intensifying suffix *xji*, often translateable as very, an example of what Chafe terms emphatic particles, is used frequently in both versions and appears here in idiomatic use, combined with *éeja*, there to mean perhaps.

5) a.

wašji<sup>gě</sup><sub>t</sub> roooo,higi<sup>rú</sup><sub>t</sub> sga<sub>re</sub>!

b.

Hare emphatic,

me you let go imperative!

c.

Hey you, Hare,

let me go!

Example 5 also contains an emphatic particle, o, a loud drawn out vowel, which is substituted for the vowel *a* when a person is shouting over a distance or when special emphasis is desired. Often it is used to end a tale, as it does the oral myth described here. Example 5, consisting of a command shouted at a distance to Hare by the sun, comes from the written narrative, but is a verbatim copy of part of an oral sentence given by the narrator in a loud singsong which I have attempted

to represent visually here. The sun's command is repeated several times in both narratives, and in the oral, though not the written tale, its second instance is varied by inclusion of the prefix *kara* your own in *higirúšgara* let me go to form *hikurúšgare*, which introduces an element of pleading into the construction. Such variation within repetition could be termed an involvement strategy, I would think, since it plays upon audience expectations.

Another involvement strategy in the written text appears in example 6 which, like example 1, mimics the repair mechanisms of oral style.

- 6) a.  
     *hí há!*  
     *wootágnagre,*  
     *žigé...*
- b.  
     Well now!  
     story that I was telling sitting,  
     again...
- c.  
     Well now!  
     to get back to the story  
     again...

The deliberate use of such repairs in writing supports the hypothesis that in speech these constructions serve a positive function in enhancing involvement and aiding discourse cohesion.

#### Integration and Syntactic Complexity:

It is not useful to discuss the integration of Winnebago sentences in terms of the majority of the forms listed by Chafe as integrative in English since the syntactic structures of the languages differ considerably. It is possible, however, to examine the Winnebago data on the basis of more general criteria for integration suggested by Tannen and Chafe: subordination, explicit connectives, foregrounding and backgrounding techniques, incorporation of more information than can be expressed in a simple sentence, and the like.

The complexity of most of the oral and written Winnebago sentences becomes apparent when they are compared to such simple sentences as example 5. Winnebago is an SOV language, but example 5 is only a one clause SV construction since it has no separate object, only the first person objective prefix *hí* attached to the verb.

Example 4 (repeated here as example 7) by way of contrast, a three clause utterance, is demonstrably more complex although it too is a single sentence, what Chafe would call an idea unit, because of its

intonation and the close relationship between its propositions. In structure it varies from the usual arrangement of clauses seen in examples 1 and 2 in which the main clause is sentence final. In this example the main clause is preceded and followed by subordinate clauses.

- 7) a.
- |           |                           |          |
|-----------|---------------------------|----------|
| te'é      |                           | Clause 1 |
|           | ʃaagú hirorák'ukʃenegiži, | (sub.)   |
| hagoréiža | éeʃaxʃi                   | Clause 2 |
|           | hirapérezikʃéneena,       | (Main)   |
| hoit'éra  |                           | Clause 3 |
|           | hirapéresgiži.            | (sub.)   |
- b.
- This one
- what -with your own you do future if,
- time one - perhaps
- you know causitive future declarative,
- language the
- you know when.
- c.
- What
- you will do with this one,
- perhaps sometime
- you will know
- When you know
- the language.

The subject of all three clauses of example 7, the tale's audience, does not appear in the sentence outside of verbal second person reference. Broadly speaking, the first clause has an OV structure with the object being te'é this one and with the verb phrase ending in giži when, one of the subordinate clause ending suffixes identified by William Lipkind 1945. The second, main, clause consists of a verb phrase preceded by two adverbs and ending in na, a declarative and indicative marker classed as a final suffix by Lipkind. The final clause is another OV construction ending in the subordinating verbal suffix giži. Thus, among other devices, this complex sentence is integrated by means of the subordination of some of its propositions to others, the connection between them made explicit by verbal suffixes.

Another major factor in its integration derives from the nominalizing function of subordinating suffixes noted by Lipkind. Chafe finds nominalization to be the most characteristic integrative device in written language. In the first clause the subordinating suffix giži acts with the morpheme ʃaagú what to nominalize the entire verb phrase.



This same subordinating suffix in the third clause makes that verb phrase adverbial. Thus, the first clause serves as the object of the main verb phrase found in the second clause, while the third clause stands in adverbial relationship to it. This results in a well-integrated Winnebago sentence with an overall OV structure.

Omission of the subject in example 7 topicalizes the object of the first clause, *te'é this one*. The effect of this foregrounding is not only integrative within the sentence, but strengthens the cohesion between it and preceding sentences in the discourse. Signifying as it does the tale itself, this deictic pronoun in its penultimate sentence refers back to the entire text, and its topicalized position enhances its effect. It is interesting to note that as well as being a factor in sentence and discourse integration in this instance, use of *te'é* was one of the involvement strategies found only in the spoken tale.

Similar topicalization takes place in example 2 (repeated here as example 8) where the object of the first clause, *éesgeniisge sort of like that*, comes before the subject *waakšígra the people*, and refers back in the text to the preceding eight sentences.

8) a.

éesgeniisge  
                     (waakšík) waakšígra woorágiregá,  
 éegu  
                     (woorág) waikánaka horágrušjálnega,  
 héegu  
                     téežeesge horágirešunuge,  
                                     wahánakšana.

b.

that like sort of  
                     (people) -people the -storytell they when,  
 continuing on  
                     (stories) -myths sitting those -telling they finished when,  
 continuing on  
                     this that like -to tell they used to because,  
                                     I am speaking sitting declarative.

c.

When  
                     they finished telling a myth  
 people told  
                     what they meant by it,  
 Because  
                     they used to explain them like that,  
                                     I am doing it too.

- b.  
 also  
     similar to -arrive thou and I plural would if,  
 also  
     wellbeing -people sitting this -thou and I them to  
     associate with plural if,  
 also  
     continuing on -wellbeing -thou and I come by standing  
     plural future,  
 continuing on  
     that like -story -it means sitting declarative.
- c.  
 Also  
     if you and I would do that,  
 also  
     if you and I would concern ourselves with people's  
     wellbeing,  
 also  
     you and I would continue in wellbeing,  
 to go on -  
     that's what this story means.

In some ways this type of structuring of oral Winnebago sentences is reminiscent of the stringing together of short utterances with simple conjunctions such as and, but and so which Chafe and others consider to be a manifestation of fragmentation and lack of integration in spoken English; this seems especially true in cases of the repetition of éegi and or éesge so. However, the English sentences of this type lack integration because they lack explicit connectives showing subordination and other relationships between propositions. In Winnebago, this function is performed not by the terms repeated at the beginning of clauses but by the verbal suffixes at the end of them. Lipkind lists nearly fifty of these suffixes classed as either final, adverbial or subordinating.

In example 3, it can be seen that written Winnebago sentences also make use of these verbal suffixes to achieve syntactic integration. They very seldom, however, use the clause initial terms in the same way as the spoken language. Consider example 11 from the written narrative.

- 11) a.  
     Zeesgenunigé  
     wasjigéga hijáira hiperéz roogúgi,  
     haabókahi  
     tée jaagúizá wa'uýéegi,  
     hikišérezé.

b.

that like nonetheless

Hare -to increase -to know -he wanted if,

day every

this -whatever -it was standing if,

he busied himself with it quotative.

c.

In spite of that

since Hare wanted to know more about it,

everyday

he made it his business to find out

what in the world it might be.

Example 11 begins its first clause *Xéesgenunigé in spite of that* in the same way that a typical oral sentence might, but since it does not use a comparable term at the beginning of the next clause, it does not set up the same sort of structural repetition. Consequently, its arrangement as verse is more arbitrary.

#### Conclusions:

The texts examined for this paper consist of a total of 187 Winnebago sentences composed by one individual. Conclusions drawn from such limited data can only be considered tentative and suggestive for more extensive study. That oral literature possesses syntactic integration uncharacteristic of most speech, however, is being attested to by a growing body of evidence. Chafe 1981 and 1982, for instance, has concluded that compared to colloquial Seneca, ritual Seneca displays the integration he has usually found in writing. He also finds ritual Seneca to be more detached, lacking the involvement found in informal Seneca speech.

Such detachment is not a feature of White's Winnebago Hare myth. Both the oral and written versions make extensive use of the "oral" involvement strategies described by Tannen and Chafe; indeed, the spoken tale begins and ends with remarks made directly to its auditor, myself, in spite of the fact that at the time it was being recorded I did not comprehend enough of the language to understand what was being said.

The style of the two Winnebago texts is essentially similar, their most obvious stylistic difference lying in the greater oral use of the repetition of certain clause initial terms. There is some indication, however, that this difference might possibly mark one distinction in Winnebago between poetry and prose. Much more data would need to be examined in order to determine the validity of such a supposition.

Perhaps the best clue as to how to regard these Winnebago narratives comes from Bright's observation (1982:171) that "the difference between speech and writing is not necessarily basic to a definition of literature." Perhaps both integration and involvement are characteristic of most literature, whether written or spoken, poetry or prose.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Now seventy-five years old, Mr. White, a bilingual Winnebago/English speaker, learned the story of how Hare snared the sun at an early age from his grandmother. It is a *waiká*, a narrative about supernatural characters traditionally told only during the winter months.

<sup>2</sup> Alice Fletcher's 1889 account of the development of the Winnebago syllabary from a Sac and Fox model in the late 1880s includes a description of that syllabary which is quite different from one recorded by Amelia Susman 1940. White's syllabary, similar to the unpublished Susman version, includes modifications made by himself and an aunt. According to Kenneth Miner of the University of Kansas, several variants of the syllabary exist today in Wisconsin though its use is in decline.

<sup>3</sup> I do not intend to imply by their use that the preliminary and experimental arrangements I have made here to highlight certain repetitions of sounds and morphemes are the only possible presentations. Arrangement according to the metrical qualities of the language, for instance, might well prove revealing. I thank Kenneth Miner for his aid in the assignment of accent and length to the data.

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